

## **Civic Center Task Force Progress Report for January 4, 2006**

Submitted by Jan Davis, Task Force Chairman

On January 4, 2006 the Civic Center Task Force met and continued its information gathering process. The majority of the meeting was spent on hearing reports about past proposals for the Asheville Civic Center.

### **Comparable Models**

Sasha Vrtunski presented information on the governance structures that are used in the facilities that were presented to the Task Force at the last meeting. There were three types of governance structures: Policy-making boards that report to elected officials; Boards that act as owners and are directly responsible for the facilities; and Non-profit Boards that act as owners and run as typical non-profit boards.

Ben Durant, the City's Chief Financial Officer, presented the hotel occupancy taxes that are collected in North Carolina and how they are used. He presented the same information for Food and Beverage taxes. The Task Force asked Mr. Durant to collect information on state funding of performing arts centers, and more specifics the occupancy taxes in Cumberland County and Wilmington.

### **Highland Group Study - Peggy Berg**

Peggy Berg was asked by the Tourism Development Authority to answer the question whether Asheville needed a convention/conference center. Ms. Berg discussed the assets of Asheville. She also discussed convention centers in other cities. Some cities have convention centers focused around the state capital and the need for groups to come and meet with legislators; others have convention centers to enhance their dominance in a particular industry.

Given that Asheville's economy is most strongly around visitors and tourism, she asked the question, what facility would give Asheville the most leverage among destination cities?

Ms. Berg stated that a study by the Brookings Institution showed that there has been unprecedented construction of convention and arena facilities while at the same time there has been an unprecedented decline in convention business. Currently cities have to pay to bring conventions to their cities. It is anticipated that there will be some recovery in convention business, but there is considerable ground to recover.

Asheville has 50% more convention space than other cities of the same size. Three quarters of larger state and regional conventions already come to Asheville for some of their functions. Ms. Berg suggested that Asheville could look at other cities that took advantage of their natural and built assets to increase visitor spending.

What is the optimum investment to take Asheville to the next level? She recommended that Asheville should find unique solutions that fit this unique community.

### **Heery Report – Ed Hay**

The Task Force for the Future of the Civic Center started in 1996. It started with a series of public meetings. The message the Task Force got was that the Civic Center was a very important part of the community. After those hearings, they felt that the community wanted a civic center and it was a matter of what and how to build. The Hunter Interests report, which was to look at the future, had several recommendations: Asheville does not need a 20,000 seat arena; the Thomas Wolfe will suit our needs. The report also said that Asheville was missing out on a lot of convention business and recommended a public private partnership to build a convention center and an adjacent hotel. The Task Force did not find support in the community for that option. The Task Force thought that the report did not pay sufficient attention to renovating what was already in place. The Task Force began looking at where the arena should be located and identified 5 sites that were suitable and synergistic with another City goal. Those sites were UNC-A, Holiday Inn Sunspre, the River, existing location, parking lot south of City Hall. The Task Force decided that renovating the existing arena would be the best option.

The next step was hiring Heery. The Task Force told Heery that they wanted first class performing arts center, arena that meets the future needs (at the time this included sports teams), that they want to host the conventions that they thought they were missing. Also, the Task Force wanted to be able to keep trade shows and perhaps expand on that. The final report is the product of lots of conversations to meet those needs.

The primary benefit of the Heery report is that it takes what we have and develops it as a multi-use facility. Each part of the facility would work as a stand alone component or could be used in conjunction with the others. A new performing arts facility would be located between the current building and Lexington Avenue and provided retail on Lexington as well. It added two more entrances, making the facility more accessible and taking care of some problems with simultaneous events.

The Task Force felt at the time that the report was the culmination of thinking things through keeping costs in mind. Mr. Hay said that the Civic Center is an integral part of the City and there is an obligation to keeping it as a part of Asheville. The number one job is to make sure that plans are carried out this time.

## **PBCL Architecture Study – Richard Fort and Irvin Pearce**

PBCL Architecture was asked to look at using the Heery Report and give recommendations with reduced costs. A second report was done specifically on the Thomas Wolfe Auditorium.

In the first report, PBCL recommended not going down the hill towards Lexington and having several smaller, modestly scaled buildings. The first recommendation was to renovate the Thomas Wolfe Auditorium as a performing arts center. This included adding a section to the front of the building adding room for restrooms, ticketing and making the auditorium more accessible. Renovation of the theater area would change the seat arrangements with an eye towards improving acoustics. It was also recommended that the entire stage be demolished to accommodate better truck access, more usable green rooms, stage offices, star rooms.

The next aspect was a convention support structure to the east of the Arena was recommended. It would be three stories, with support areas, pre-function rooms and meeting rooms. They agreed with Heery and concurred with their recommendations for the arena.

The next recommendation was for a second performing arts hall specifically designed for a symphony hall. A thousand-seat theater would be located at the corner of Haywood Street and Battle Square Extension across the street from the Civic Center. Included in this would be associated support areas and a 200 seat theater (black box theater). Their design also included a retail and commercial aspect. A building across from the St. Lawrence Basilica was designed with 12,000 square feet on the first floor and 24,000 square feet on two floors above. They also designed in a 4 ½ level parking structure with 315 spaces to the north of the Battery Park Apartments. As a part of this structure, a ballroom was designed to be on top of the structure because they thought it was a better location for it, and it would be a dynamic location for those functions.

Mr. Fort said that the report is now 3 ½ years old and some of the ideas are relevant today, and some may not be relevant. They felt that there were significant cost savings by not going down the hill and they agreed with the Heery report's recommendation that there be a roundabout in front of the Civic Center.

A year later PBCL Architecture was asked to look at the Thomas Wolfe Theater. There was more detail in that report with cost figures that are no longer valid. Irvin Pearce spoke about the Progress Energy Center for Performing Arts. He reviewed the construction costs for the different parts of the building, which was done in phases. The Memorial Auditorium was most recently renovated for 10 million dollars, the Meymandi concert hall was built for 20 million dollars and the Fletcher Opera Theater was built for 15 million dollars. He said that the City of Raleigh took an incremental approach to the facility. Their firm was able to alter the acoustics of Memorial Auditorium to accommodate truck and bus shows.

In 2003 PBCL estimated that the cost of renovating the Thomas Wolfe Auditorium at \$18 million and because of increases in the cost of construction, they would estimate that to be \$25 million to \$30 million dollars. It was noted that to improve sightlines, that 350 seats would be lost in this process and the resulting theater would be about 2000 seats.

The Task Force's next meeting will be Wednesday, January 18 at 5:30 pm in the Banquet Hall of the Civic Center. At this meeting, the Task Force will hear a presentation from the Asheville Area Performing Arts organization. The main event of this meeting, however, will be public comment.